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## The experiences of academic and research bloggers: a phenomenological enquiry

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## **The experiences of academic and research bloggers: a phenomenological enquiry**

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### **Abstract**

Our research project investigates the experience of academics (i.e. educators working in higher education) and researchers using blogs in their work. The three objectives are: 1) to identify reasons why academics and researchers begin writing and maintain a blog as part of their practice, 2) the contribution of blogging to the academics' and researchers' personal and professional development and 3) the challenges they experience. One component of the research involves conducting individual open-ended interviews by email with academic/research bloggers. The interviews are analysed using descriptive phenomenology, to gain an understanding of both the idiosyncratic aspects and the general essence of the bloggers' experiences. Findings reveal that bloggers think of others through their blog: beginners feel encouraged to blog by following advice from others or examples of experienced bloggers; the more experienced consider blogging an opportunity to disseminate and exchange information with others. Therefore, blogging does not mediate relationships only between bloggers and readers, but also with people outside the readership but still connected to the blog. For some academics and researchers, blogging is an 'experiment' to think through ideas and find a voice in the public arena. This form of experimentation and exploration fosters both personal reflection and social interaction. However, public experimentation triggers feelings of anxiety and uncertainty amongst some academics/researchers. This seems due to the unfamiliar way in which blogs occupy an intermediate space among established writing forms (i.e. academic papers, journalistic articles, diaries), thereby blurring the private-public and formal-informal divide.

**Keywords:** academic bloggers; blogging; descriptive phenomenology; phenomenology; phenomenological enquiry; research bloggers; social software; Web 2.0.

### **Transcript of the presentation:**

Slide no.	Transcript
1	Hello everyone.  Thanks to Deborah [ <i>chair of the session</i> ] for introducing our presentation, and thank you all for being here for our session. I would also like to thank the conference organisers, Dr Linda Finlay and Dr Darren Langdridge, for offering us the opportunity to present our work to you.

	<p>I am an academic at The Open University and I have been conducting this research as part of my Doctorate. The aim of this presentation is to show you how a phenomenological method was applied in our research project. My supervisor, Dr Shailey Minocha, and I investigated the blogging practices of academics and researchers, analysed using descriptive phenomenological psychology alongside other methods.</p>
2	<p>The structure of our presentation is as follows:</p> <p>The first two slides outline the rationale for our study: why we came to investigate the experiences of blogging in academic and research contexts.</p> <p>I will then outline our three research questions.</p> <p>Then I will describe the methods employed in our research. Data was gathered over three years and I have used several research techniques, but the focus in this presentation is on one component of the research, analysed using descriptive phenomenology.</p> <p>Then I will present the results obtained from the phenomenological analysis of the data. I will illustrate the results using quotations from the participants' responses.</p> <p>I will discuss the conclusions derived from the data analysis and results, and the empirical and methodological contributions of using phenomenology as a research method.</p> <p>Finally, the list of sources referenced in this presentation.</p>
3	<p>Let's start by defining what a blog is. The blog is a type of website, it can serve different purposes according to the person or group of people who maintain it. It can be an online journal, or an online diary if it is more personal. Individual blog entries are presented in reversed chronological order. This image <i>[points to blog image on slide]</i> shows how a blog may look like. This is my blog, which I use as a research journal. The newest entry is at the top of the page.</p> <p>Blogs have been around since the mid Nineties. They were initially more popular in journalism and business contexts. Since the early 2000s they have been embraced in education.</p> <p>Several studies have been conducted on blogging in education, in a range of contexts, secondary and tertiary education, classroom-based and online learning. For example, Kerawalla <i>et al.</i> (2008) showed evidence of blogs facilitating personal reflection, collaborative working, and developing writing skills among master's students. They also highlighted the importance of a flexible use, suiting the individual's needs (i.e. as an optional activity, used as a personal learning journal, or to seek feedback from readers using the comments feature).</p> <p>Given that blogging in educational contexts facilitates collaborative working, it could be argued that it illustrates Martin Heidegger's concept of <i>Mitwelt</i>: the blog enables <i>Dasein</i>, the existing person, to be in the world with others, to be social.</p>

4	<p>Among the challenges encountered in the literature (e.g. Ellison &amp; Wu, 2008) there was a concern over ownership of ideas and privacy. If a blog is public and accessible to millions of internet users, it is not impossible for readers to steal ideas and pass them as their own, particularly if blogging anonymously. However, there are privacy issues if bloggers write under their true identity and are not careful about disclosing personal information, such as where they live and when they are away on holiday. Blogging under a pseudonym, or being cautious about revealing personal information, can help minimise these challenges.</p> <p>To date, empirical evidence on the uses of blogs in higher education, in particular among educators and researchers, is not extensive. Most studies are small-scale studies, involving three to five participants, within the same institution. One such example is Kirkup (2010).</p> <p>Our study aims to investigate how the lived experience of being-in-the-world-with-others through blogging occurs, if it does, in academic and research domains.</p> <p>The expected outcomes of our research project are to develop empirically-grounded guidelines for blogging in academia and research, but also in other professional initiatives.</p>
5	<p>Let's look at the three research questions in our study:</p> <p>1. Why do academics and researchers engage in blogging? The first question looks at the motivations for academics and researchers to keep a blog as part of their work: what prompts them to start and maintain a blog.</p> <p>2. How does blogging contribute to the academics' and researchers' personal and professional development? This research question looks at the possible benefits of blogging towards personal and professional development. It looks, for instance, at the role of blogs in developing research skills, in fostering public engagement, promoting work, making an impact.</p> <p>3. What challenges do academics and researchers face with blogging? The last research question looks at the problems and concerns academics and researchers experience as bloggers; any cautionary measures they need to consider when blogging.</p>
6	<p>This empirical study of phenomena is part of a doctoral research, involving a sample of 26 participants: academic and/or research bloggers. They range from research students to senior-level academics and researchers. They come from higher education institutions in and outside the UK and Europe, including non-English speaking countries.</p> <p>The findings presented today come from written responses to an unstructured interview, consisting of one open-ended question by email. These responses were collected from 23 out of the 26 participants. They were analysed using descriptive phenomenological psychology: the Duquesne School approach (Giorgi &amp; Giorgi, 2003).</p> <p>This table <i>[points to table]</i> illustrates the methods used to collect the data on the left-hand column. The right-hand column shows the methods used to analyse each artefact. Our focus today is on the first artefact and analytical technique: unstructured interview and descriptive phenomenology.</p>

	<p>The other datasets collected in this doctoral study are: individual semi-structured interviews (analysed using inductive thematic analysis), textual blog extracts (analysed using discourse analysis) and visual blog extracts (analysed using a combination of thematic and saliency analysis).</p> <p>It should be noted that, for Heidegger, the experience of being-in-the-world-with-others takes place through language and discourse. One of the ways of investigating lived experiences is through analysing discourse. This, in part, informed my choice of discourse analysis as one of the techniques.</p>
7	<p>Returning to the unstructured interview, the data from this artefact should help to obtain background information about the blogger and to tailor the questions in the follow-up semi-structured interview.</p> <p>But why use descriptive phenomenology to analyse the unstructured interview? This technique helps to derive the psychological significance of the bloggers' lived experience. It looks at the idiosyncratic aspects first, then it derives a general structural description of the bloggers' experience, by breaking the narrative into meaning units.</p> <p>Descriptive phenomenology helps to convey feelings in words, to produce coherent and chronological narratives of people living a common experience, from the beginnings i.e. what made people start a blog (which is relevant to RQ1) to the benefits and challenges experienced (RQs 2 and 3).</p> <p>Finally, descriptive phenomenology complements the strengths of other analytical techniques:</p> <p>Inductive thematic analysis helps to derive the patterns most relevant to the research questions, and the most recurrent in the sample. Unlike other qualitative approaches, it is not bound to one theoretical or methodological framework (and our study draws from more than one framework).</p> <p>Saliency analysis looks at the importance of the theme for one participant, and for the research questions, even if it may not be recurrent across participants.</p> <p>The strength of discourse analysis is its focus on the meanings of language and linguistic styles. The approach of ethnography of communication, in particular, tries to identify social and cultural patterns in the speech of a community (in this case, academic blogging), what forms of communication, rules, functions are important to the community (academic and/or research bloggers) and this should emerge from their blogging style and content.</p>
8	<p>This is the open-ended question used for unstructured interview, carried out by email. I asked the academic and research bloggers:</p> <p>“Please tell me about your experience with blogging: how do you feel the blog helps you in your role?”</p> <p>As introduced previously, this is the first stage of our research project. The other artefacts were collected and analysed afterwards.</p>

<b>9</b>	<p>Let's now look at the results obtained from this open-ended question.</p> <p>What emerged from these quotations, taken from responses to the open-ended question, is the experimental nature of blogging. This is lived in slightly different ways among these bloggers:</p> <p>P2 (Participant 2) perceives blogging as a form of experimentation, to explore and construct thoughts. For P3, blogging is also an experiment. He tests something new to him: writing a diary online, and writing it in public.</p> <p>The psychological significance of this experience is the perception of experimenting something novel, unfamiliar to these academics and researchers: writing personal thoughts and reflections in the public arena.</p>
<b>10</b>	<p>Another psychological aspect emerging from the results is the bloggers' awareness of other people.</p> <p>P2 says that her later blogging was influenced by the style of Sam (a fictional name) who is a more experienced blogger. She sees his blogging work as a model to look at. For P7, blogging connects her to other people with similar thoughts. Likewise, blogging helps P25 to engage with other people with similar interests, breaking down the geographical barriers. Without blogging, being an academic and researcher would be a very lonely experience for P25.</p> <p>Therefore, bloggers think of other people through blogging, although this happens in different ways among them: by looking at more established bloggers who influence their own experience with blogging, or by connecting with like-minded people.</p>
<b>11</b>	<p>A third psychological aspect emerging is the bloggers' feeling of uncertainty or anxiety towards their audience.</p> <p>P5 was sometimes unable to fully express his thoughts on his blog, because of his awareness of who his readers are, and who should not read what P5 really thinks. P9's blogging is influenced by her awareness of an audience, but by her uncertainty about who her readers are. P5 and P9 are both aware of an audience and feel uncertain or anxious about it, but while P5 feels anxiety for knowing who could read his thoughts, P9 has feelings of uncertainty because of <i>not</i> knowing who might read them.</p> <p>P3, who perceives blogging as a form of public experimentation, as previously seen, is concerned about sharing confidential information to an audience. He says he tries not to be influenced by his readers, but he can't help to think about them.</p> <p>These bloggers feel uncertainty or anxiety towards their readers, which to some extent influence their blogging experience. These feelings may be due to different reasons: the experience of 'experimenting' something novel in public, the awareness of an audience, or of not knowing who their audience is.</p>
<b>12</b>	Let me now summarise and derive the essence of the experience of academic blogging. I

	<p>will also show you the empirical contribution of phenomenology, in providing answers to the three research questions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ RQ1 looks at reasons for beginning a blog, and one of these seems to be for experimenting, testing a new way of thinking and finding a voice in the public arena.</li> <li>⤴ Regarding personal and professional development through blogging, addressed in RQ2, it seems that blogging facilitates networking and constructing relationships. Academics and researchers think of others when they blog. They do not just mediate relationships with readers, but also with other people outside the readership but still connected to the blog (such as colleagues, experienced bloggers, people with similar research interests, etc.).</li> <li>⤴ Regarding the challenges experienced by bloggers, addressed in RQ3, it emerges that they feel anxious towards their audience: for experimenting something novel, or for awareness of a readership. This anxiety can ultimately be explained by the unfamiliar position of academic blogs among established writing forms (such as personal paper diaries, newspaper articles, peer-reviewed academic articles). With academic blogging, the boundaries between private and public, and formal and informal, are blurred.</li> </ul>
13	<p>As shown in this diagram, other writing forms are placed more clearly within their quadrant.</p> <p>For example, the personal paper diary is more private and more informal, compared to the other writings. The personal blog can be in the public domain, but the blogger usually has control on the privacy settings, and can restrict access. Newspaper articles are usually open to a public, and their language is not as formal and technical as the language of peer-reviewed academic papers. Also, access to academic papers is in many cases restricted to subscribers, and to a specialist audience. The academic or research blogs in my sample are closer to the centre of the diagram. They are not as informal as personal blogs and diaries, but their language is less technical, more accessible to non-specialist readers.</p> <p>This tension, between the formality and informality of academic blogging, and public versus private access, appears to be reflected in the bloggers' subjective experience.</p>
14	<p>Using descriptive phenomenology, to analyse the initial unstructured interview, contributed to answer the three research questions in the empirical study, but it also provided a methodological contribution.</p> <p>It helped to create and adapt the materials in the subsequent data collection stages, and provided guidance on applying the other techniques, such as adapting the semi-structured interview questions; or directing to a blog extract.</p> <p>For example, at the unstructured interview, a PhD student said that she was reluctant to blog about her research progress, and she kept a separate private journal for it. Her anxiety about sharing in public, highlighted using phenomenology, helped me to tailor some of the follow-up interview questions to expand on this aspect of her experience. I asked her why she was concerned (whether for authorship issues, or fear of readers' judgement, etc) and how she coped with this challenge. The follow-up interview clarified that it was due to</p>

	<p>preserving intellectual property. She wanted to ultimately share her work, but only after publication in formal research outputs.</p> <p>The unstructured interview also helped me to locate important blog postings, meaningful to the blogger's experience, and relevant to a research question. For example, one academic mentioned that she occasionally used the blog to post essay drafts and solicit responses from readers, to be able to refine and eventually publish the drafts as journal or conference papers. At the unstructured interview she described one blog posting in detail, so I was able to locate her posting and analyse how this form of mediating relationships and peer-reviewing was taking place on the blog: short exchanges between blogger and readers, informal language, etc.</p> <p>Therefore, this technique can echo or reiterate the analysis of other datasets. The follow-on semi-structured interview helps to clarify issues emerged at the unstructured interview. The blog extracts illustrate how aspects of the bloggers' lived experience, described in their narratives, occur in practice.</p>
15	This is the list of referenced material. If you have any questions about locating other similar studies you can contact me at the email address supplied in the next slide.
16	The presentation ends here. Thank you very much for listening. I hope you enjoyed it, and I look forward to your questions!

## References

- Ellison, N.B. & Wu, Y. (2008) 'Blogging in the classroom: a preliminary exploration of student attitudes and impact on comprehension', *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, **17**(1): 99-122.
- Giorgi, A. & Giorgi, B. (2003) 'Phenomenology', in Smith, J.A. (ed) *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, London: Sage.
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## The experiences of academic and research bloggers: a phenomenological enquiry

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### Outline

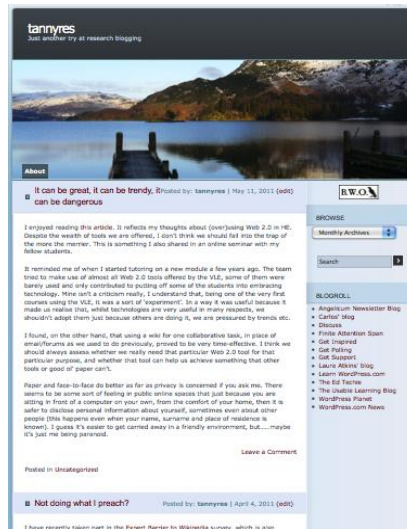


- Rationale for the research (2 slides)
- Research Questions
- Methods (3 slides)
- Results (3 slides)
- Conclusions (3 slides)
- References

## Rationale (1)

- Blogs: online journals or diaries
- Blogging used in education since the early 2000s
- Facilitates reflection, develops writing skills, flexible use (e.g. Kerawalla *et al.*, 2008)
- Promotes collaborative work  
→ being in the world with others (Heidegger's *Mitwelt*)

### Blog:



3

## Rationale (2)

- However, privacy and authorship concerns (e.g. Ellison & Wu, 2008)
- Few empirical studies on blogging in academia and research (e.g. Kirkup, 2010)
- How does this lived experience of being with others occur in academia?
- Outcomes of our research: empirically-grounded guidelines for blogging in academia and research

4

## Research Questions (RQs)



1. Why do academics and researchers engage in blogging?
2. How does blogging contribute to their personal and professional development?
3. What challenges do academic and research bloggers experience?

5

## Methods to collect and analyse data



- Part of a doctoral research. 26 participants → academic and research bloggers
- Unstructured interviews by email (open-ended question) → 23 responses

→  
Our focus in this presentation

\*ethnography of communication

Artefact	Analytical technique
<b>Unstructured interview</b>	<b>Descriptive phenomenology</b>
Semi-structured interview	Thematic analysis
Blog content (textual)	Discourse analysis (EoC)*
Blog content (visual)	Thematic / saliency analysis

6

## Why use descriptive phenomenology?



- Unstructured interview data: to tailor semi-structured interview questions
- Descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003): to derive a psychological significance (idiosyncratic aspects + general essence) of bloggers' experience
- Conveys feelings in words. Produces coherent, chronological narratives: from motives to start blogging (RQ1) to benefits and challenges experienced (RQs 2-3)
- Complements strengths of other techniques: patterns most relevant to RQs (thematic/saliency analysis); meanings of language and text (discourse analysis)

7

## The open-ended question:



Please tell me about your experience with blogging: how do you feel the blog helps you in your role?

- Unstructured interview, analysed with descriptive phenomenology → first step in the empirical research

8

## Results: blogging as an experiment



P2: Blogging was an opportunity for me to experiment with some ideas, and explore and develop thoughts that I had...

P3: I make [my blog] public for two reasons: (a) I want to experiment writing a diary online (it's a first for me); and (b) I want to experiment with it being public

Psychological significance:

Both perceive blogging as an experiment: testing a novel way of writing and reflecting on a public forum

9

## Results: awareness of others



P2: I think my later blogging was influenced by Sam's\* style - really nice visuals with an informal tone

P7: blogging helps me...in connecting me to other people who think about the things I think about

P25: I believe without blogging academia would be a much lonelier pursuit as very few people who live near me share my interests

Bloggers think of others: look at experienced bloggers for models; connect with like-minded people through blogging

\*fictional name

10

## Results: anxiety towards audience



P5: there are times when I haven't really been able to say what I want because I know who's reading!

P9: Now I am unsure of who my audience is, and I sense my ideas need to be a little more formulated before I post

P3: I try not to let the fact that it's public influence me (although I can't help think of the audience who might read it when it comes to protecting participant data...

The experience of 'experimenting' something new in public, and the awareness of knowing/not knowing the audience, trigger feelings of uncertainty and anxiety

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## Conclusions: the essence of the experience

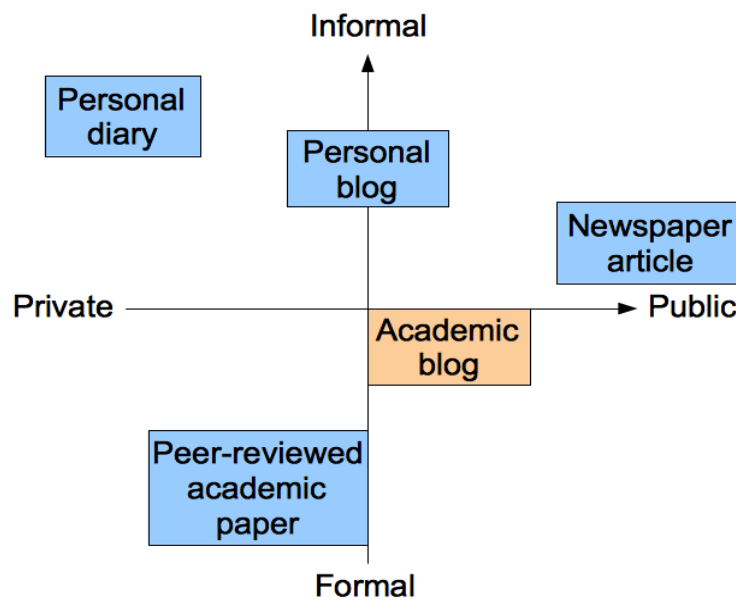


### Academic and research bloggers...

- begin blogging to experiment a new way of thinking and finding a voice in the public arena (RQ1)
- think of others and mediate relationships with readers and other people outside audience but connected to the blog (e.g. colleagues, experienced bloggers) (RQ2)
- feel anxiety towards audience (RQ3) for the unfamiliar position of blogs among established writing forms: blurring the private-public and formal-informal divide

12

## Academic blogging among other writing forms



13

## Methodological contribution of phenomenology



- Besides empirical contribution (helping to answer RQs) → methodological contribution to the larger study
- Helped to create and adapt the materials in the subsequent data collection stages
- Provided guidance on applying the other techniques (e.g. framing the semi-structured interview questions; directing to a blog extract)

14



## References

Ellison, N.B. & Wu, Y. (2008) 'Blogging in the classroom: a preliminary exploration of student attitudes and impact on comprehension', *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, **17**(1): 99-122

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Kirkup, G. (2010) 'Academic blogging: academic practice and academic identity', *London Review of Education*, **8**(1): 75-84

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## Thank you for listening!

Contact: [t.p.heap@open.ac.uk](mailto:t.p.heap@open.ac.uk)

Any questions?

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